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Out of Place: Unprofessional Painting, Jacques Rancière and the Distribution of the Sensible

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One way of characterizing the challenge that Jacques Rancière poses is to see his work as a refusal to 'know your place', to see it as a refusal to endlessly reconfirm and re-establish the places that have been set for workers or, for that matter, for left-wing intellectuals. 'Knowing your place' might well be one of the abiding questions of the engaged intellectual: 'how is it that the worker knows his or her place?' The answers supplied have tended to posit a form of internalization (of power relations) as the solution to this riddle: for Louis Althusser, for instance, the inculcation of ideology is performed by a subject identifying as the object of a police enquiry; for Bourdieu it is the inevitable result of a profound and constitutional pedagogy.[1] But what if these solutions were not the answer to the riddle but another aspect of its seemingly effective performance? In designating the place for workers (as those that 'know their place') and intellectuals (as those that understand how it is that workers 'know their place') aren't the likes of Althusser and Bourdieu complicit in staking out a certain distribution of proper places? Or, more fundamentally, doesn't their work perform the very thing it sets out to unmask (in this Althusser takes the role of the police inspector and Bourdieu the role of the class instructor)?

Rancière begins elsewhere. His challenge begins when we ask: what happens when a worker or an intellectual refuses to know their place? What happens, for instance, when an educator no longer teaches what they know, but starts to teach from a position of shared ignorance? What happens when a worker refuses to follow the path ascribed to them as either

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 95 12/1/2010 6:34:54 PM

good worker or revolutionary worker, and instead opts for bohemia, for dreams, for painting or poetry? In following these seemingly more wayward trajectories, Rancière concocts an approach to the social that is alive to its 'distribution of the sensible'. For Rancière the distribution of the sensible is 'the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience' (2004b: 13). This phrase, 'the distribution of the sensible' (*le partage du sensible*) takes us into the heartland of Rancière's approach to politics and art. Synoptically it is the uneven carving-up of the sensorial world. By continually starting from specific instances of the orchestration and re-orchestration of the sensorial, Rancière provides a form of aesthetic attention that alters our understanding of, and our approach to art and politics. In privileging moments of aesthetic impropriety (in politics as much as in art), Rancière writes critical histories that examine breaches in the distribution of the sensible and that uncover the virtual equality that is ushered in when the distribution of the sensible is disrupted, and when a redistribution of the sensible is possible.

In this essay I want to explore the opportunities and problems that arise from Rancière's work, particularly in relation to his choice of the 'distribution of the sensible' as the insistent object of study. I will look at a concrete example of a possible breach in the distribution of the sensible: a 1938 exhibition that included a number of artworks by mineworkers from the Ashington colliery (in the North-East of England) called 'Unprofessional Painting' (as we will see much will hang on the term 'unprofessional'). But to get there I need to spend some time quickly outlining the force of Rancière's aesthetic approach to the social.

I. The Distribution of the Sensible

In an essay from 2005 Jacques Rancière announces his project in the following way: 'it is not a matter of art and taste; it is, first of all, a matter of time and space' (2005: 13). He is writing about aesthetics, but he could just as easily have been writing about politics:

> Politics, indeed, is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these object and putting forward arguments about them. (2009a: 24)

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 96 12/1/2010 6:34:54 PM

The formulation acts like a warning: you thought aesthetics was about taste or what counts as art, but you are getting ahead of yourself, you need to take some steps back. You thought politics was all about power or struggle but you need to start from a more concrete encounter with the social.

The social, for Rancière, is the orchestration of times and spaces, of sense and non-sense. It is the sensual, material realm that demarcates what is visible and what remains invisible, what gets heard as speech and what remains noise (who is heard and who is not). On another register (one less explored by Rancière) it parcels out the whole realm of sensuous, passionate life: proper and improper emotional responses, the allocation of disgust and delight to smells and sights; and so on. But this 'distribution of the sensible' is reliant on a temporal geography that will underwrite it: here, in this place, at this time, you will count as a problem to be solved; but at another time and place you will just be invisible. Take for example the speech of someone recounting their life story in a psychiatrist's office and that same speech being heard in a job interview. What is an appropriate and understandable discourse in one place becomes inappropriate disclosure (and unlistenable-to) in another. The cultural materiality here is not a hierarchy of established values that might be representative of a class or a culture (or the conventions of a social scene), it is the physical space of the doctor's office and the interviewing room, the segment of time that it fills (the 50-minute hour, for instance), and the way they connect and disconnect with the orchestrations of other spaces and times.

Rancière's doctoral thesis, which was published in France in 1981 as *La Nuit des prolétaires* (translated and published in English in 1989 as *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*), established a set of awkward examples that have continued to vivify his thinking and reveal the centrality of understanding the social world as the distribution of times and spaces. In the book he follows the lives of worker-poets and worker-philosophers in the 1830s and 1840s many of whom are converts to the utopian socialism of Saint-Simon. The lacemakers, seamstresses, cabinetmakers, joiners, printers, and floor-layers that Rancière introduces us to, do not unite in fraternal solidarity demanding the recognition of the 'dignity of labour'. Far from it, they know that hard manual labour robs them of what they most want: freedom. Instead of desiring better conditions, they desire the languid existence of bourgeois leisure: time to think, time to write. So they graft during the day, and live their bohemian lives at night.

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 97 12/1/2010 6:34:54 PM

For Rancière it is a significant discovery: the history of workers doesn't correspond to the historical mission laid out by doctrinaire Marxists. More crucially it lays the foundations for Rancière's political aesthetics. In the social setting of *The Nights of Labor* the worker is faced with an orthodox distribution of time, money, rest and leisure, where 'good workers' (seen by both the left and the right) exert themselves on the work of others during the day and replenish themselves by sleep during the night. To know your place as a worker is also to know your partition of time: a time for work, a time for rest. By stealing back the hours of night for another form of existence (another form of labour), the worker-poets don't simply intervene in the production of poetry, they intervene in the distribution of allotted time. And this intervention, for Rancière, is the condition of politics:

> Politics occurs when those who 'have no' time take the time necessary to front up as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do emit speech capable of making pronouncements on the common which cannot be reduced to voices signalling pain. (2009a: 24)

These worker-poets are performing politics by reusing the nights that are meant for proletarian sleep, by making themselves at home in a medium that is not theirs (poetry, philosophy), and dreaming of a life that they weren't born to. Politics, in Rancière's idiosyncratic use of the term, is

> whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise. (1999: 30)

Against the dominant usage of the term 'politics', that would see it as a theory of parties and policies, Rancière trenchantly allows it only one meaning: the enacting of a disruption in the parcelling out of allocated space, time and sense. The workers' dreams make no sense in the prescribed landscape of *proper* social relations. Rancière will describe his subsequent enquiries as emanating from this capturing of night by the worker-poets: 'substituting a topography of the *re*-distribution of the possible and a multiplicity of lines of temporality for the order of time prescribing the impossible has been a red thread in the process of my research' (2005: 23). The possible is the workers' dream deemed as impossible by a temporal ordering that would offer workers no time and no dreams. It is only by behaving improperly, of disrespecting propriety, that a new distribution

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 98 12/1/2010 6:34:54 PM

of the sensible is possible. It is this concentration on the distribution of time and space, and the possibilities for reconfiguring it, that link Rancière's approach to politics to his approach to art. Indeed, in as much as art performs a possible alteration of the distribution of the sensible, it becomes the privileged example of meta-politics.

In his many writings on aesthetics Jacques Rancière takes to task the usual slicing up of art historical periods. Rather than settle for the one-thing-after-another of art's 'isms' (futurism follows impressionism which is followed by surrealism, and so on), or of the epochal designations of 'realism' followed by 'modernism' and then on to 'postmodernism', Rancière suggests another route that both follows the historical patterning of periodization while also flouting its logic of substitution. Central to his account of art is the emergence of what he calls the 'aesthetic regime of art': the form of art emerging at the end of the eighteenth century that fundamentally reorganizes the sensorial realm. His example comes from the writer Stendhal. Looking back on his late eighteenth-century childhood in provincial France Stendhal recounted that the noises that marked his childhood were 'ringing church bells, a water pump, a neighbour's flute' (2009a: 4). Stendhal would, of course, go on to be one of the major authors of literary realism. For Rancière the crucial item on Stendhal's list is the water pump: it is the inclusion of this that demonstrates the way that the aesthetic regime of art is founded on an indifference to a hierarchy of significance (the water pump is as glorious as the cathedral organ and the church bells) and on a concomitant sensual pedagogy (the material recognition of the water pump as a potentially glorious noise). Thus the literary registering of the everyday constitutes a 'new writing made up of sensory micro-events, that new privilege of the minute, of the instantaneous and the discontinuous', which is coterminous with a 'new education of the senses informed by the insignificant noises and events of ordinary life' (2009a: 10, 6). The republican ethos of Stendhal's French childhood provides the sensorial education that will allow the erstwhile insignificant sounds of water pumps to become significant, and this education will be an aesthetic one, enacted by a range of different elements including literature. What marks this example out as particularly significant for Rancière is not because it demonstrates the point where 'water pumps' are added to the list of things that can be considered significant and worthy of a writer's attention. It is because at the moment when a 'water pump' challenges the regime of the worthwhile (what Rancière calls, somewhat confusingly, the

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 99 12/1/2010 6:34:54 PM

'representative regime of art'), a door swings open showing the whole sensate world as (potentially) worthy of attention.

For Rancière art is always social in as much as it always describes a sensorial realm, and is always involved in 'constituting forms of common life' (2009a: 26). Stendhal's writing not only demarcates an orchestration of sensual life, whereby what had been considered insignificant becomes newly significant, it allows new collective and democratic experiences to come into being on the grounds that older forms of significance have been disorganized and superseded. This is the aesthetic regime of art and it simultaneously names an indifference to any established hierarchy of iconography, while it also establishes a new form of identification of art as art. But rather than this latter assertion heralding the autonomy of art (the autonomy of art from social necessity), it does precisely the opposite: it ties art to the communities of those prepared to recognize it as such. Take, for instance, the case of painterly abstraction. Traditional art history might understand the difference between an abstract painting and a naturalistic rendering of a scene of ordinary life as the radical refusal of the former to enter into the business of representation. For Rancière both forms of naturalism and abstraction partake in a redistribution of the sensible that establishes ordinariness and equality as their tacit but insistent leitmotif:

> for abstract painting to appear, it is first necessary that the subject matter of painting be considered a matter of indifference. This began with the idea that painting a cook with her kitchen utensils was as noble as painting a general on a battlefield. (2004b: 54)

Abstract paintings function to constitute 'forms of common life' by their invitation to a community of painters and onlookers that anything is a possible subject of art. And this, in a different way, is also true of the painting of a cook. What both share is their negative response to a regime of art where everything had its place in a pecking order of value:

> What is the kernel of the aesthetic revolution? First of all, negatively, it means the ruin of any art defined as a set of systematisable practices with clear rules. It means the ruin of any art where art's dignity is defined by the dignity of its subjects – in the end, the ruin of the whole hierarchical conception of art which places tragedy above comedy and history painting above genre painting, etc. To begin with, then, the aesthetic revolution is the idea that everything is material for art, so that art is no longer governed by its subject, by what it speaks of; art can show and speak of everything in the same manner. In this sense, the aesthetic revolution is an extension to infinity of the realm of language, of poetry. (2003: 205)

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 100 12/1/2010 6:34:54 PM

The aesthetic revolution in art is meta-political in both its redistribution of sensual matter (what is worthy of notice, what is paintable, sayable) and in its positing of a community of those who might recognize a new redistribution of sensible matter.

Such an approach to aesthetic work is without doubt valuable: not only does it reconfigure a host of tired demarcations of 'movements', but more importantly it also connects art to life in an urgent and vital way. Yet it also poses a number of questions that might return us to older questions of the relationship between art and life in their material entanglements. For instance, if the painting of a cook rather than a king opens up art to the equality of matter, then how are we to think of this sign of equality? Is it actual or virtual? A probability or a possibility? And what are the limits of its potential redistribution? If a cook is worthy of the painter's eye, is this same attention to be aimed at everything? Is there nothing that either falls below the horizon of visibility or else provokes taboos in relation to visibility and points to the limits of indifference? (For instance same-sex and interracial desire or young people's sexuality are hardly a matter of indifference to newspaper columnists and censors.) If a disruption occurs that potentially allows everything to be deemed worthy of attention then how long does this equality last before 'a cook' just becomes part of a new list of acceptable images? And, lastly, what sort of communities might be fashioned under this sign of equality, that also participate in other 'distributions of the sensible' that might be connected with other material spaces and times (not least the spaces and times that are signalled by such designations as 'professional' and 'unprofessional)? To pursue this last question (and that is all I can do here) it is worth looking at a concrete and complex example of a community of painters.

II. Unprofessional Painting

The exhibition 'Unprofessional Painting' opened on 8 October 1938 at the Bensham Grove Educational Settlement in Gateshead-on-Tyne. It then travelled to the Wertheim Gallery (London), to the Peckham Health Centre and Fulham Town Hall (both in London), and on to the Mansfield Art Gallery (Glasgow). The exhibition consisted of around 50 paintings and about a dozen sculptures by the Ashington Art Group as well as paintings by other so-called Sunday painters. The exhibition was organized by

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 101 12/1/2010 6:34:54 PM

Robert Lyon, a lecturer in painting at Durham University (who was also the group's tutor) and Julian Trevelyan and Tom Harrisson, both of whom were involved with the recently formed social experiment Mass-Observation.[2] The Ashington Art Group had its beginnings in 1934 as part of a self-organized education club associated with the colliery and facilitated by the Workers Education Authority (the WEA). Members would ask the WEA to supply tutors who would deliver a lecture course on their specialist topic (evolution, for instance). In 1934 the topic was 'Art Appreciation' and Robert Lyon, their lecturer for the course, started off by showing black-and-white slides of Italian Renaissance painting. It quickly became clear that this approach was failing to engage the interests of the audience (who were predominantly mineworkers). After some discussion it was suggested (by Lyon, it is presumed) that 'appreciation' of art might be arrived at by practical activities (lino cuts, wood cuts and later by painting).

By 1938 the group had become an enthusiastic painting collective (who, crucially, put money from painting sales into a communal fund). When the Mass-Observation team visited the colliery town, the art group were an established force that had been the subject of various newspaper articles and radio programmes. The 'pitmen painters' painted a world of work and leisure, of domesticity and public life in and around Ashington: football games, colliery buildings and machinery, dogs, pigeon crees, allotments, pithead baths, committee meetings, mining incidents and injuries, local characters, and so on. For Tom Harrisson two related aspects of the paintings were crucial. First: the lack of perspective in the paintings (or rather lack of conventional 'single-point perspective') was seen as being truer to ordinary life than the technically proficient work of engaged social realists such as the Euston Road school of left-leaning artists (William Coldstream, Lawrence Gowing, and so on). Second: the artists were seen as imbuing their subject matter with an urgent and authentic materiality:

> It is easy to forget that every factory, slag heap and villa, was built by man. But it is not easily forgotten by the bricklayers, joiners or spinners. So when Harry Youngs, who holds the iron for the blacksmith to strike in the shop at the bottom of the pit shaft, and has but two fingers on one hand, sees a pit pony, it is more than lovely; it is his living his life.[3]

The sense of authenticity that was ascribed to the Ashington miners' paintings by the press and by the likes of Tom Harrisson was connected to the enthusiasm that various avant-gardist tendencies had for untutored and

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 102 12/1/2010 6:34:54 PM

'naive' work in general. The work of the Cornish fisherman, chandler and artist Alfred Wallis, for example, had recently been championed by artists like Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth. Wallis' paintings rendered the Cornish coast or a journey to Newfoundland on bits of timber using industrial paints, and in a manner that was closer to a medieval mapping of space and significance, than forms of naturalism that had been practised since the renaissance.

Such untutored work could be seen as performing avant-gardist 'practices of negation'. The phrase is T. J. Clark's and it is his way of grouping together the varied interests of cutting-edge modernist and realist artists since Courbet. For Clark 'a practice of negation' was an innovation in painting 'whereby a previously established set of skills or frame of reference [. . .] are deliberately avoided or travestied, in such a way as to imply that only *by* such incompetence or obscurity will genuine picturing get done' (1985: 55). The examples that Clark offers include:

> Deliberate displays of painterly awkwardness, or facility in kinds of painting that were not supposed to be worth perfecting. Primitivisms of all shapes and sizes. The use of degenerate or trivial or 'inartistic' materials. Denial of full conscious control over the artefact; automatic or aleatory ways of doing things. A taste for the margins and vestiges of social life; a wish to celebrate the 'insignificant' or disreputable in modernity. (1985: 55)

Clark's description of avant-garde 'practices of negation', which corresponds, to some degree, to Rancière's 'aesthetic regime of art', would explain the value of the art of Wallis or the Pitmen Painters *for* the professional avant-garde artist. Here, then, were untutored artists using inartistic materials (household paints, bits of cardboard), painting subject matter that was considered insignificant not just artistically but also socially; painters who were also positioned in a distinctly marginal relationship to the centrality of the metropolis.

For Julian Trevelyan, a surrealist artist and one of the Mass-Observation team, the work of the Ashington Miners, as well as work by various Sunday painters that he was getting to know, put the very project of avant-gardism in jeopardy:

> These, and other Sunday painters that I now met, filled me with doubt about the value of professionalism in painting; they expressed themselves with so much more 'sayfulness' (a favourite word of Tom Harrisson) than most of the exhibitors at the London Group or the Royal Academy; they had had to forge for themselves their own language, and the need to do so must have been very strong in the first place. (1957: 91–2)

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 103 12/1/2010 6:34:54 PM

No doubt 'sayfulness' is a coded way of establishing the value of authenticity, but it seems clear that for an art practice that attempts to negate the values of tutored art then the work of those who haven't actually been tutored is bound to fashion the kinds of work that the tutored can only envy.

Yet from the perspective of the Ashington miners it is equally clear, of course, that what is being painted is not a negation either in its subject matter or in its style of rendering. Dogs and work, for instance, aren't painted as examples of the 'insignificant' or 'the margins of life' but as central and significant aspects of life. Similarly 'painterly awkwardness' is not achieved by shrugging off technical proficiency in the name of the aleatory and the automatic, but by never having access to technical proficiency in the first place. The staging of the Unprofessional Painting exhibition, then, could be seen as a clash between two 'distributions of the sensible' that result in a mutual misunderstanding based on a common object of value (the paintings). The explanations of the paintings' value would no doubt be different depending on whose perspective is followed, yet both seem to allow the aesthetic regime of art to establish the possibility that anything and everything might be a subject for art.

During the middle weekend of the Gateshead exhibition a debate was organized around the proposition that 'Anyone Can Paint'. In the end the motion was carried by 40 to 20, but it seems clear that the mix of responses was characterized by mutually incompatible values. For instance one of the speakers who voted against the motion was 'George Downs, who sells women's underwear in the Caledonian Market' who, although he had a few pictures in the exhibition, knew that not everyone could paint as he 'has been trying to paint for years' but 'still couldn't'.[4] For the *Daily Express* 'professional painters need have no jealousy' in regard to an exhibition like Unprofessional Painting, as it would simply increase interest in the sort of work that professional avant-garde artists were then doing. The exhibition similarly re-established a distribution of the sensible around the very value of professionalism by ascribing prices for the various artworks according to whether the 'artists' were represented by a gallery or not (£50 for a painting by the postal worker and artist Louis Vivin and £2 for a painting by an Ashington miner). Vivin (who had recently died) transmogrified from a professional postal worker to a professional artist. The Ashington painters remained 'pitmen' painters – professional proletarians who painted.

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 104 12/1/2010 6:34:55 PM

The exhibition 'Unprofessional Painting' could be seen to establish a disagreement or a dissensus at its core. This dissensus revolves around not just whether 'anyone can paint' but the delegation of professionalism. The people that gathered in Gateshead were professionals but their professions were clearly distinct: a mix of those whose professions were first and foremost proletarian and those who had the luxury to be writers, painters, journalists. Yet this gathering in a place, where everyone involved has a set of common concerns (albeit concerns that point in different directions) and a set of common objects, offers an image of community without a shared identity. For Rancière the community-making function of the art of the aesthetic regime is not producing identity-driven communities but communities organized around dissensus and dis-identification:

> I do not take the phrase 'community of sense' to mean a collectivity shaped by some common feeling. I understand it as a frame of visibility and intelligibility that puts things or practices together under the same meaning, which shapes thereby a certain sense of community. A community of sense is a certain cutting out of space and time that binds together practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility. (2009b: 31)

The extent to which the group that gathered at Gateshead to discuss whether 'anyone can paint' were a community of sense is, I think, an open question. To some degree it seems clear that various parties were talking past each other, and that their relationship to the aesthetic regime of art were of different degrees. Yet it also seems apparent that congregating around this space and time was a virtual equality that if it didn't become operative was at least glimpsed.

Rancière reminds us that there has always been music, dancing, picturing, and so on, but what we call 'Art' has only been in existence for the last 200 years. 'Art', in this sense, is coterminous with the aesthetic regime of art, it is art that declares its autonomy from the world of social necessity, and in so doing reveals its (necessary) relationship to the social (in Kantian terms it reveals that its social purpose is its purposelessness). Yet one of the characteristics of the aesthetic regime of art is the way that it includes previous regimes of art within its folds: 'the temporality specific to the aesthetic regime of the arts is a co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities'; 'at a given point in time, several regimes coexist and intermingle in the works themselves' (2004b: 26, 50). In the case of the Unprofessional Painting exhibition one of the shared aspects of its aesthetic regime was a desire to imagine a return to a time before 'Art', a time when there was always music, dancing, picturing, a time when this was an ordinary part of

life. For Trevelyan 'the Ashington Group was part of a movement which would make painting as common an art as music once was'.[5] The aesthetic regime of art incorporates the desire for its dissolution as its crucial characteristic.

The aesthetic regime of art is not an image of utopia: it is animated not simply by the political disruption of the sensible and the opening up of the sensate world to the proposition of equality. It is also animated by what, in another context, Rancière calls police logic. This is the force that marshals the sensible to the orchestration of an uneven and interested distribution. Rancière has the measure of how crucial the term 'professional' is in the breaching and redistribution of sensorial orchestrations. Writing in *Disagreement* about the trial of the revolutionary Auguste Blanqui in 1832 Rancière recalls the details of the exchange between the judge and Blanqui:

> Asked by the magistrate to give his profession, Blanqui simply replies: 'proletarian'. The magistrate immediately objects to this response: 'That is not a profession', thereby setting himself up for copping the accused's immediate response: 'It is the profession of thirty million Frenchman who live off their labor and who are deprived of political rights'. The judge then agrees to have the court clerk list proletarian as a new 'profession'. Blanqui's two replies summarize the entire conflict between politics and the police: everything turns on the double acceptance of a single word, *profession*. For the prosecutor, embodying police logic, profession means job, trade: the activity that puts a body in its place and function. It is clear that proletarian does not designate any occupation whatever, at most the vaguely defined state of the poverty-stricken manual labourer, which in any case, is not appropriate to the accused. But, within revolutionary politics, Blanqui gives the same word a different meaning: a profession is a profession of faith, a declaration of membership of a collective. (1999: 37–8)

The dissensus at Gateshead figured the term 'professional' as the 'elephant in the room' – the strikingly obvious aspect that no one was talking about. It organized whether you were called a painter or a 'Pitmen' painter. Yet 'unprofessional' was not simply a marker of class it was also a profession of faith that pulled in multiple directions not least towards the possibility that 'everyone can paint'.

III. Conclusion

As an art historian or art critic Jacques Rancière is out of place. Indeed he claims to have little expertise in the area, falling into writing about art just because people asked him to. The invitations to write came mainly from an art community who had found something in his book

The Ignorant Schoolmaster that connected with their own situation, their own desires. But what would be the measure of Rancière's contribution to art history? In relation to the art historical business of characterizing different forms of art and periodizing the *longue durée* of art history, Rancière's approach is not startlingly new. His characterizing of the 'aesthetic regime of art' often seems to invoke an understanding of the long history of 'the modern' that is often taken-for-granted in art historical and 'lit-crit' circles. For instance his insistence that the aesthetic regime is constituted by an endless inauguration of 'the splendour of the insignificant' in visual art and literature is a common assessment of the rise of the novel and the emergence of 'the painting of modern life'. John Dewey, for instance, could claim in 1934 that 'the novel has been the great instrument of effecting change in prose literature. It shifted the centre of attention from the court to the bourgeoisie, then to the "poor" and the labourer, and then to the common person irrespective of station' (1980 [1934]: 189). The point here is not that it is Dewey rather than Rancière who could be seen as originally minting this insight, rather that even in 1934 you didn't really need to argue your case for a claim like this. Similarly Rancière's elaborate demarcation of different regimes of art is both suggestive and limited. In plotting out a movement from an ethical regime to a representative regime and on towards an aesthetic regime of art (which can also include within it aspects of the other two regimes) Rancière's schema is no more or less convincing than other macro histories of art: it fits where it touches. Indeed Christa and Peter Bürger's historical sociology of art and literature, which plots out the functional transformation of literature across a similar time period, and which finds similar functional breaks as Rancière (though to quite different ends), is in many ways a much sturdier edifice.[6]

The value of Rancière's work does not lie here but in the way he puts art and politics out of place. The value of being out of place is not to carry on 'business as usual' but to alter the realm of the sensible. And it is here that Rancière's phrase 'the distribution of the sensible' works to enliven our commerce with art and with the sensual and sensorial world more generally. From one perspective it might seem that Rancière hugely overestimates the social currency of art by making it his prime example of where such a distribution of the sensible is figured, but in doing so he takes art (and non-art) out of the realm of the taken-for-granted (where everything is in its place). Perhaps it is in his claim that art is a form of meta-politics where the overestimation of art results in constraining the

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 107 12/1/2010 6:34:55 PM

real productivity of pursuing the 'distribution of the sensible'. The metapolitics of art links him, in my mind at least, to German critical theory (particularly to Walter Benjamin) and Rancière's assessment of the role of the art of the aesthetic regime can read like an amalgam of Adorno and Benjamin:

> Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity. That is why those who want to isolate it from politics are somewhat beside the point. It is also why those who want it to fulfil its political promise are condemned to a certain melancholy. (2010: 133)

In the end, though, it is not such thoughts that seem most compelling for taking art to a new place. It is as sensible matter that connects to other sensible matter that allows art to become improper and to share some space with the larger world of sensible matter.

In treating art as sensible matter Rancière connects artworks to communities of people in ways that are compelling and materialist: 'Human beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together; and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of "being together"' (2009c: 56). There are myriad ways forward from this work that would include not just rethinking what we do with art, but also thinking about the aesthetic dimension of our social worlds more generally. It might mean, for instance, that we need to look much more seriously at the sensual and sensorial dimensions of our social worlds. If Rancière offers nothing else he at least offers us a way of taking aesthetics away from a world of fussy deliberations about 'art and beauty' into a lively social world animated by the full range of passions.

Notes

1. Louis Althusser's influential description of ideological identification is central to his 1969 essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Note towards an Investigation)' (Althusser 1971). Pierre Bourdieu's homology between education and social positioning is most extravagantly described in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Bourdieu 1992 – first published in France in 1979). Rancière's reply to Althusser is given in *La Leçon d'Althusser* (1974); his reply to Bourdieu can be found in *The Philosopher and his Poor* (2004a – first published in France in 1983).

PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 108 12/1/2010 6:34:55 PM

2. This very short account is reliant on Trevelyan's autobiography *Indigo Days* (1957) and William Feaver's *Pitman Painters: The Ashington Group 1934–1984* (1993), as well as on Lee Hall's play (which is based on the same material) *The Pitmen Painters* (2008). It should be noted that there is scant material from the painters themselves about their work though Feaver quotes from various interviews he conducted when researching his book. For material on Mass-Observation, cf. Hubble (2006) and Chapter 6 of Highmore (2002).
3. Tom Harrisson cited in 25 September 1938, *The Sunday Sun* (reproduced in Feaver 1993: 79).
4. *Daily Express,* 18 October 1938, in Feaver (1993: 82).
5. *Daily Express,* 18 October 1938, in Feaver (1993: 82).
6. Cf. Bürger and Bürger (1992). This point is also made by Gail Day in her 'The Fear of Heteronomy' (2009), which offers a trenchant critique of Rancière's lack of attention to avant-gardism.

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PBowman_05_Fpp.indd 110 12/1/2010 6:34:55 PM